

PROPOSED ANTECEDENTS OF WORKPLACE INCIVILITY IN THE SERVICE SECTOR

LIM HUI LING¹, FARIDAHWATI MOHD. SHAMSUDIN^{1,2}, SUBRAMANIAM SRI RAMALU¹

¹Othman Yeop Abdullah Graduate School of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

²Department of Management, College of Economics and Political Science, Sultan Qaboos University, PO Box 20 Muscat, Oman

¹Email: hllim5818@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In the context of service sector, uncivil behaviour toward customers is likely to harm the effectiveness of the service provider. Built upon the stressor-emotion model of counterproductive work behaviour developed by Spector and Fox (2005), we attempt to explain workplace incivility in this context by proposing that role stress (role conflict and role ambiguity) and interactional justice (interpersonal justice and informational justice) may provoke uncivil behaviours through the mediation of negative emotions. In addition, we propose that self-monitoring may play a role in moderating the relationship between negative emotions and workplace incivility.

Keywords: Workplace incivility; role stress; interactional justice; negative emotions; self-monitoring.

1. INTRODUCTION

The economic focus in Malaysia now has been gradually shifted to the service sector, which has become the prime driver of the national economic transformation and growth. Since 2005, the growth rate of this sector has surpassed that of the manufacturing sector with the exception in the year of 2010 (Ministry of Finance, 2012). In 2012, the service sector recorded a gross domestic product of RM410 billion, far ahead of other sectors (Economic Planning Unit, 2013).

One of the of the key success factors of the service sector lies in its human resources (Wright et al., 1993). But despite the critical role played by the human capital in the service sector, issues related to service delivery remain a headache for many service organizations. As delivering services involves direct interaction with the service provider and the service receivers or customers, episodes of rudeness or incivility during such delivery are likely to be unavoidable. Rude behaviors influence productivity, commitment, and service quality towards customers, and eventually retard the competitiveness of the service sector. In 2012, an evaluation conducted by Reader's Digest showed that Kuala Lumpur was ranked at the bottom list of the Least Courteous Cities at number 34 out of 36 major cities (Lim et al., 2012). Such ranking is consistent with the study conducted by Ida Rosnita and Zeti Zuryani (2012), who found that workplace incivility is a common issue in the Malaysian workplace.

Andersson and Pearson (1999) defined workplace incivility as "low-intensity deviant behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect," (p. 457). To them, uncivil behaviours are generally mildly intense. Examples of incivility include speaking to co-worker condescendingly, supervisor ignoring a worker in a meeting (Miner & Eischeid, 2012), avoiding from returning a phone call or even a smile (Bartlett et al., 2008), and making demeaning remarks about co-workers (Cortina et al., 2001), among others. These uncivil behaviours can be contrasted from serious forms of workplace deviance such as physical aggression or sexual harassment. But unlike the serious forms of deviance, uncivil behaviours normally lack clear intent to harm (Roberts, 2012). While instigators may intentionally or unintentionally engage in uncivil acts to

harm their target, the targets or witnesses may perceive these behaviours as intentional or accidental acts from the instigators (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Pearson & Porath, 2005). This means that some uncivil behaviour may be due to the instigator's ignorance or a target's misinterpretation. Hence, in this manner, workplace incivility is referred to as a "milder form of psychological mistreatment in which intentionality is less apparent" (Cortina et al., 2001, p. 64).

Despite its mild character, uncivil behaviours can have detrimental effects to both the organizations and employees if left unaddressed. It is estimated that workplace incivility may cost companies averagely USD50,000 for every lost employee in terms of productivity, potential litigation, and hiring of new employees (Pearson & Porath, 2005). Various studies have also revealed that workplace incivility result in negative workplace outcomes such as reduced job satisfaction, increased turnover intention, absenteeism, reduced organizational commitment, job stress and psychological distress (Cortina et al., 2001; Lim & Cortina, 2005; Lim et al., 2008; Pearson et al., 2005; Pearson et al., 2000; Penney & Spector, 2005). Other studies showed that incivility negatively affects career salience, motivation, morale, confidence and self-efficacy of employees (Bartlett et al., 2008). Furthermore, incivility can spiral into aggression or violence over time (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Because of the adverse impacts of workplace incivility, it is important to understand the possible causes or antecedents.

To help identify causes of workplace incivility, we propose to apply the stressor-emotion model of counterproductive work behaviour developed by Spector and Fox (2005) because it is generally agreed that incivility at work is a form of counterproductive behaviour, albeit a minor one (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Johnson & Indvik, 2001), that is interpersonal in nature. Furthermore, the measures of counterproductive workplace behaviours used in previous studies, to a certain extent, overlap with uncivil behaviours. For example, gossiping and making sarcastic remarks are regarded as uncivil behaviours (Leiter, 2013; Shim & Park, 2008) but they have also been used to measure counterproductive behaviours. But regrettably, limited research has explained incivility using this theoretical perspective.

Toward this end, this paper is organized as follows: Next, the stressor-emotion model of counterproductive work behaviour is presented, followed by a discussion on how role stress and interactional justice lead to work incivility. Then, a discussion on the role of negative emotions as a mediator and self-monitoring as a moderator in the relationship is offered. This paper ends with some concluding remarks.

2. STRESSOR-EMOTION MODEL OF COUNTERPRODUCTIVE WORK BEHAVIOUR

The stressor-emotion model of counterproductive behaviour was developed by Spector and Fox (2005). According to their model, individuals engage counterproductive work behaviours as a consequence of their emotional responses towards organizational stressors. When environmental conditions or events are perceived as threatening, they are considered as stressors (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These perceived stressors result in negative emotions, which are the precursor to counterproductive work behaviours. In addition, the stressor-emotion model recognizes individual differences in employee behaviours; not all individuals experiencing the same emotion will behave in the same way. The ways individuals perceive the situation, respond to stressors, and regulate their emotions are not the same.

In this paper, we propose that role stress (role conflict and role ambiguity) and interactional justice (interpersonal justice and informational justice), which are considered stressors, may provoke uncivil behaviours through the mediation of negative emotions. In addition, we propose that self-monitoring may moderate the relationship between negative emotions and workplace incivility.

3. WORKPLACE INCIVILITY: A PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

3.1 ROLE STRESS AND WORKPLACE INCIVILITY

The stressor-emotion model of counterproductive work behavior suggests that occupational stress or job stressors, such as organizational conflict and interpersonal conflict, play a crucial role in predicting counterproductive behavior (Spector, 1998; Spector & Fox, 2005). One of the gaps identified here is that role stress could also be a potential cause of incivility. There is evidence that role stressors affect employee behavior (Frone, 2008; Moyoyinola, 2008).

Role stress emanates from role ambiguity and role conflict (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Kahn et al., 1964). Role ambiguity refers to unclear or vague expectations given to an individual pertaining to his or her performing role (Kahn et al., 1964; Rizzo et al., 1970). It arises when there is insufficient information given to an employee, causing him or her to take on some coping behaviours. The employee may attempt to solve the problem in order to avoid the stress or employ defence mechanisms, which distort the reality of the situation (Kahn et al., 1964). On the other hand, role conflict refers to inconsistent or incompatible expectation required of an individual (Rizzo et al., 1970). Role conflict occurs when two or more sets of role pressures exist in the individual's work environment, and the compliance with any of these pressures hinders the achievement of another (Kahn et al., 1964). When a person faces role conflict, it becomes increasingly more difficult for him or her to meet all of the sent expectations (Zohar, 1995). Tension will be created when individuals find it difficult to perform their various roles successfully.

Due to the complex environment and nature of services sector, role stress is possibly an important variable in the service sector where there is a high level of human interaction among people. For example, Chung and Schneider (2002) found that customer service employees tend to face role conflict when serving customers and management at the same time. Sharma and Sharma (2008) found a high stress level among banking employees in India due to excessive working hours, psychologically demanding work, unclear objectives and expectations apart from other personal factors.

Previous studies support the idea that counterproductive work behaviour can be a response to role stressors, as suggested by the stressor-emotion model of counterproductive work behaviour. Indeed, role stress has been found to lead to a number of negative work-related consequences (Gilboa et al., 2008; Glismeyer et al., 2007; Safaria et al., 2011) such as aggression (Taylor & Kluemper, 2012), hostility and sabotage (Chen & Spector, 1992), and perceived workplace mistreatment (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Skogstad et al., 2007). In a disorganized workplace where employees face high level of role conflict and ambiguity, employees are unclear of the guidelines for what constitute appropriate behaviour or conduct at the workplace (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Bowling & Beehr, 2006). Employees may engage in behaviours that protect their self-interests (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007). As observed by Pearson et al. (2000), an ambiguous work setting can foster incivility among employees and worsen collegial relationships. Therefore, on the basis of the model and previous discussion, we propose that employees who experience higher level of role stress will engage more in incivility.

Proposition 1a: Role conflict is positively related to workplace incivility.

Proposition 1b: Role ambiguity is positively related to workplace incivility.

3.2 INTERACTIONAL JUSTICE AND WORKPLACE INCIVILITY

Organizational justice has been gaining increasing attention in counterproductive behaviour research (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). We consider interactional justice in particular among other dimensions of

organizational justice such as procedural and distributive justice (Colquitt et al., 2001; Greenberg & Bies, 1992) because it is more relevant in the context of service sector characterized by a high level of human interaction. As suggested by Bies (2005), interactional justice would be useful in analysing the dynamics of boundary-spanning roles of service employees because this is a critical concern in the interaction and experience of dealing with customers (p. 96).

Interactional justice refers to perceived fairness of interpersonal treatment (DeConinck & Johnson, 2009). According to Colquitt et al. (2001), two types of interpersonal treatment are interpersonal justice and informational justice. Interpersonal justice describes the extent to which people are treated with politeness, dignity, and respect. It covers the relational aspects of interactional justice. Informational justice involves the explanations given to people about why procedures are being used in certain way or why outcomes are distributed in certain ways (Colquitt et al., 2001; DeConinck & Johnson, 2009). It concerns the perception of being informed and receiving sufficient explanation of the procedures. In sum, interactional justice concerns with fairness of how individuals treat each other in everyday interactions.

The stressor-emotion model of counterproductive work behaviour suggests that the perception of injustice could be a source of stress. This notion is well supported by previous works (Judge & Colquitt, 2004; Zohar, 1995). As a stressor, interactional injustice is significant in shaping employee's behaviour. Various studies have found that interactional justice is related to deviant behaviour (Ambrose et al., 2002; Ferris et al., 2012; Judge et al., 2006; Le Roy et al., 2012). Employees who think that they are being treated unfairly will be upset, demotivated, and even display deviant behaviours or retaliatory behaviours (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Viswesvaran & Ones, 2002). Empirical evidence shows that low perceived interactional justice was the strongest predictor of violent workplace behaviours (Bies, 2005; Jawahar, 2002).

Interactional justice has a stronger relationship with employees' reactions because information about procedure and interpersonal interaction is salient to employees, and the fair environment shows how much an organization concerns and cares for its employees (Cropanzano et al., 2002; Thau et al., 2007). A fair treatment affirms individual's identity within the groups. In contrast, any unfair treatment prompts the individual to take actions to protect their social standing (Folger et al., 2005; McCardle, 2007). If an employee feels that he is unfairly treated, he may display deviant behaviour in reaction. VanYperen et al. (2000) found that low perceived interactional justice was related to verbal aggression directed to co-workers or supervisors. While examining the social contextual variables that influence workplace incivility, Sayers et al. (2011) found that interactional (in)justice was one of the contributors. Hence, we propose that:

Proposition 2a: Interpersonal justice is negatively related to workplace incivility.

Proposition 2b: Informational justice is negatively related to workplace incivility.

3.3 NEGATIVE EMOTION AS MEDIATOR

Emotion is a complex state of feeling that results in physical and psychological changes that influence thought and behaviour (Myers, 2004). Negative emotions refer to unpleasant affective states with variable intensity and with calm or tumultuous conduct reactions (Andries, 2011). Lazarus (1991, 1993) roughly identified 15 different emotions and within these there are nine so-called negative emotions. These negative emotions are anger, fright, anxiety, guilt, shame, sadness, envy, jealousy, and disgust (Lazarus, 1993).

The core value of the stressor-emotion model is the emotion-centred approach to explaining counterproductive work behaviour (Spector & Fox, 2005). As a mediator, negative emotions may explain why employees are involved in counterproductive work behaviours. Emotions are immediate response to an event and may motivate subsequent behaviour (Lazarus, 1991; Le Roy et al., 2012). Research on the mediating role of negative emotion